

Horned Lark *Eremophila alpestris*



Folk Name: Prairie Horned Lark, Skylark

Status: Resident

Abundance: Rare to Uncommon

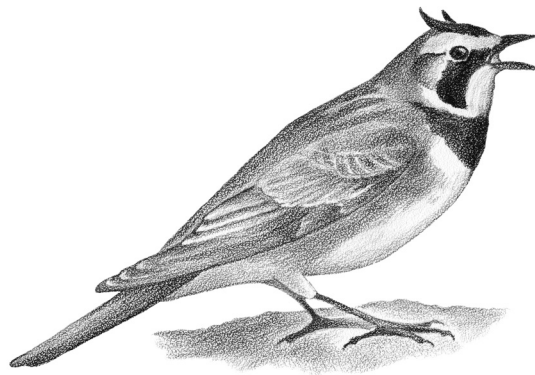
Habitat: Barren stubble fields, closely cropped pasture, patches of dirt and fine gravel, airports, poorly maintained athletic fields

In the early twentieth century, Roger Tory Peterson described the Horned Lark as “probably one of the commonest birds on the American continent,” but he doubted many Americans were familiar with it, except for “those who live in cattle country.” He described it as a “more interesting looking bird” than its famous cousin the Skylark of Europe, but admitted the Horned Lark’s song could not compare with that of its renowned relative. However, Peterson asserted that a singing Horned Lark is quite spectacular in its own right as it flies into the air “climbing an invisible spiral staircase high into the sky, scattering its tinkling notes on the brown fields below.”

Horned Larks are generally encountered in scattered flocks in open short-grass or dirt fields. Both males and females have a black curved stripe below the eye and a black bib. The male also has tiny black-feathered “horns” on his head, which can be easily overlooked by casual observers. The Horned Lark has been described by Henry David Thoreau and others as quite a “handsome” bird, but in 1915, one South Carolina newspaper offered quite a different opinion:

Looks like Satan, the horned lark does, with two black horns of feathers sticking out on top of his head. He wears a suit of a grayish brown touched with pink. A black curve over his eyes and another black crescent under his chin help give him a wicked aspect. His satanic topknot, the two tiny tufts of black feathers on the back of his head give him the name.

The Horned Lark is a year-round resident in the Carolina Piedmont, but it is most often seen in the winter. Leverett Loomis described the Horned Lark as “exceedingly abundant” in Chester County during the severe winter of 1877. Loomis reported it as a regular winter resident whose population fluctuated throughout the season because it was periodically bolstered by groups of birds forced down from the North. He conducted detailed studies of local Horned Lark flocks and published an article about them in *The Auk* in April 1888. He collected many specimens in an attempt to determine the percentage of the western subspecies of lark present in South Carolina:



J F M A M J J A S O N D

During December I shot one hundred three females and sixteen males, all of which belonged to the western race. In January thirty females and ten males of like kind were procured. A larger number could have been taken, but I desisted from shooting others as soon as I became satisfied as to the real character of the individuals constituting a company. A feature of marked prominence was the preponderance of females.

Loomis hypothesized that the reason more females were present was because the male birds wintered further north to be closer to their breeding sites.

Flocks of 50 or more Horned Larks can occasionally be found in the Piedmont in appropriate habitat during the winter. Most of these winter flocks range in size from



Horned Lark at the Charlotte Motor Speedway in Cabarrus County. (Will Stuart)

the single digits to 20 or 30 birds. The highest number of Horned Larks ever recorded in Mecklenburg County is a single flock estimated at 75 birds, found on Christmas Day in 1946. The largest number of larks recorded in the region in one day was a total of about 350 birds counted in Iredell County on the Christmas Bird Count in 1950. William McIlwaine found notable flocks in Charlotte on December 26 and 30, 1929; January 9 and 20, 1930; and February 10, 1930. On his second visit to a flock of 50 larks he found at Selwyn Farms, McIlwaine noticed the birds had become noticeably shy and skittish. He soon determined the cause: two boys had been “shooting into them.” A decade later, Elmer Brown recorded a sizable flock of Horned Larks in Mecklenburg County on February 3–4, 1940. Rhett Chamberlain reported: “A male of this species was brought to me on January 11, 1947. It had been shot in an open, freshly ploughed field just six miles east of Charlotte. The flock was estimated to number forty to fifty individuals.” David Wright found a flock of 40 birds at a farm in Huntersville on February 5, 1996. For the past decade, Horned Larks have regularly wintered near the Mecklenburg–Cabarrus county line in the dirt parking areas of the Charlotte Motor Speedway. Flocks ranging in size from 2 to 70 birds have been found there.

The winter status of the Horned Lark has changed here in recent years. Increased development throughout the region has eliminated some foraging habitat and the national population of Horned Lark is known to be rapidly declining as well. The Horned Lark ranked number 30 on the list of most common birds found on Charlotte Christmas Bird Counts conducted in count years 47–66, with an average of 0.4 birds seen per party-hour. In recent years, it has dropped to a rank of number 85 on counts conducted in count years 94–114, with an average of 0.003 birds seen per party-hour.

There were no records of Horned Lark breeding in the Carolinas prior to the 1937. During the 1930s, the species’ breeding range expanded southward from Maryland into Virginia and down into North Carolina. The first nest was found on a golf course in Lexington, NC, on April 13, 1937, and was pronounced “the most southern record for the Atlantic slope.” In 1940, two more nests were discovered in Iredell County: one in June on a farm near Statesville and one in July on a farm near Union Grove. Six nesting pairs were counted on the farm in Union Grove in 1941. The first Horned Lark nest in South Carolina was confirmed near Columbia on June 12, 1950, and this nest was later described by an ornithologist as “the farthest southeastward penetration to date.” Today, the Horned Lark remains a regular but sporadic breeder in both states. It is a local breeder in all counties in the Central Carolina region, but only a small number of actual nest records have been published. Most breeding records are of singing males or pairs of birds seen in the right habitat during breeding season or of birds encountered on Breeding Bird Surveys.

Horned Larks begin breeding in the region as early as March, but newly fledged young have been documented in the Carolina Piedmont as late as the first week of July. The first evidence of breeding in Mecklenburg County was reported by Homer Autry, a biologist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture based in Charlotte. Autry observed a pair of Horned Larks at the Cannon Airport in Charlotte on May 1, 1953. In a letter to D.L. Wray at the North Carolina State Museum Autry wrote: “The male’s singing attracted our attention and we then observed them for several minutes. I unfortunately didn’t get back later to see if they spent the rest of the summer here.” One of the most thorough local nest accounts is presented below.

In 1963, students at Garinger High School found a Horned Lark nest on campus in downtown Charlotte. At the time, the 63 acre campus was located on 7th Street where the main campus of Central Piedmont Community College is located today. Mrs. Shuford K. Peeler provided the following details of this special find:

Three newly hatched Prairie Horned Larks were found on the campus at Garinger High School on Wednesday March 27. The cup-shaped nest, 3" in diameter and 1 ½" deep, was made of dried grasses with no soft lining. The top of the nest was even with the ground, uncovered, and the nest was built against a clump of grass in a rather barren area. It was located about 25 feet from a gravel walk leading from the gym to the exercise field, tennis courts, baseball field and track, and used by hundreds of students during the day.

On their first school day the young birds looked like one round ball of rather long tan fur. Their skin was very black. Occasionally an orange-red mouth, rimmed with yellow, would open wide. We could see only two mouths, but there seemed to be enough “fur” to account for a third baby lark. Although the temperature in the morning was about 50 degrees and the wind at 10 knots, the female did not go near the nest. However, the young were visited all day by curious students. Almost always boys. The girls showed very little interest. I returned to school at 5:30 p.m. and from then until dusk the female brooded the birds at about 10-min. intervals.

Unfortunately, this nest was found abandoned 3 days later.

Mrs. Peeler provided this follow-up report in 1966:

Three years ago I wrote of Garinger High School’s nesting Horned Larks and the story came to an abrupt and sad end. Now, at last, I can report a successful nesting. The larks nested in the same barren heavily travelled area about 50 feet from a gravel walk leading from the gymnasium to the athletic fields, tennis courts, track and baseball

fields. A 15-inch stake placed near the nest was its only protection. The parent birds were very tame and allowed us to come within about 15 feet before moving away. They were almost always on the ground within an area about 200 feet from the nest and seemed undisturbed by the coming and goings of the students and faculty members.

The birds were hatched the weekend of March 19–20 and survived, in addition to the curious students, one heavy shower, winds up to 14 and 15 knots, and temperatures as low as 28 degrees.

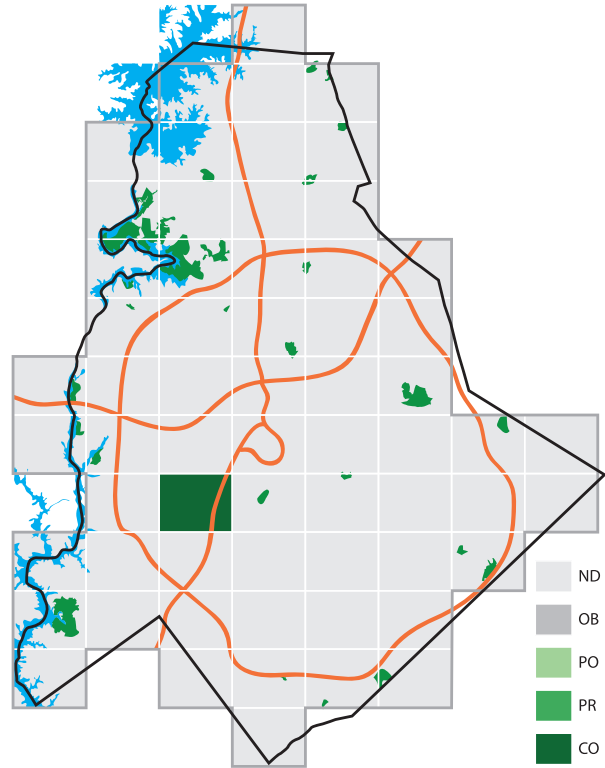
By Sunday morning, March 27, the three birds were crowding the nest, feathers had appeared on heads and bodies, and quills on wings. By late afternoon of the same day they were almost completely feathered and were spilling over the edge of the nest.

On Wednesday, March 30, two birds left the nest. The third stayed on an extra day. He was 2 ¾ inches long and almost filled the nest that had only nine days earlier appeared to contain a large grayish caterpillar. He was perfectly composed and with quiet good humor allowed himself to be petted.

I did not see any of the young birds after they left the nest but I was told that, when approached too closely, the parent birds walked away and the young birds “froze.” At least one was returned to the nest by an overly solicitous student but apparently no harm was done. Just one of the many hazards of growing up in the backyard of 2,200 high school students.

The North American Bird Conservation Initiative warns that the population of the Horned Lark is rapidly declining throughout its range. The Partners in Flight coalition considers it a “common bird in steep decline” with an estimated national population loss of 65% over the past 45 years.

Volunteers with the Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas confirmed a single nesting location during the five-year study. A breeding pair was located on the driving range at the Renaissance Golf Course in south Charlotte. The birds appeared to nest there for at least two years, but the actual nest was not found. Perhaps the most reliable breeding site in the region is the dirt parking lots at the Charlotte Motor Speedway. Immature birds have been found there in early May.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Very Local (PR/0, CO/1)